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AUTHOR Koedel, R. Craig
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ABSTRACT

Community college history instructors can overcome their reliance upon secondary sources as instructional materials and can provide students with an introducation to historical method and primary research by adding a course in local history to the curriculum. Such a course would enhance the regional focus of the college and provide a context for the study of national and world history. The benefits of this approach have been demonstrated by a course offered at Atlantic Community College on the history of South Jersey, a socially and topographically distinguishable area of New Jersey. Concentrating on cultural, rather than political, issues, students in this course learn to draw historical inferences through the use of a specially prepared narrative textbook and written and non-print primary sources, such as broadsides, diaries, and artifacts. Historical investigations are augmented by field trips to local museums and historic sites and by research papers which introduce the students to local libraries and teach the skills necessary in writing a history term paper. Though some problems have been encountered, such as the difficulty of accurately utilizing oral history and of objectively interpreting local opinion and fable, the course has made history more meaningful to Atlantic's students and has provided them with a deeper understanding of their community. (JP)

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# TEACHING LOCAL HISTORY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Presented by
Prof. R. Craig Koedel
Atlantic Community College
Mays Landing, NJ 08330

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# TEACHING LOCAL HISTORY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

History, we know, is not the past. It is an inquiry into the past to determine what was representative of its time or was significant for then and now. The record left by people of the past is where history begins. This record contains an account of the particular instances, the unique happenings, the singular ideas that provide the historian with his raw data.*

After he has set the parameters of his investigation -- the history of something or someone at a specific time and place -- the historian starts by searching for the data. He finds it in a variety of sources: public and private records; memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, and correspondence; genealogical material; inscriptions; laws and judicial decisions; artifacts, buildings, etc.; and secondarily, in the accounts of other historians.

Having found his data, the historian makes a selection from it in terms of his purpose, what he believes to be its significance, perhaps his philosophy or theory, and alas sometimes his preconceptions of what his material should tell him. To some extent before and more fully during his making of a selection, he verifies the reliability of his data by subjecting it to a series of tests, including internal and external textual criticism. If its reliability is questionable, he uses it with caution or discards it altogether.

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*The presenter, being a male, uses masculine pronouns throughout this paper with no intent to deprive the many female historians of their just due. He has chosen not to employ the awkward he/she combination nor the ungrammatical "their" when a singular form is needed.

Then he assembles his data, organizes it, and draws inferences from it -- or, to put it another way, by induction he arrives at general ideas from particular instances. He shows cause-effect relationships and proposes hypotheses about the probable meaning of these relationships, past and present, and with some hesitancy their possible meaning for the future. He then presents the result of his inquiry in written form, or more often in the case of community college teachers, in class lectures.

In community colleges, professionals in history can be more aptly described as teachers of history than as historians. Teaching loads, other demands on their time, the expectation that they will be primarily instructors, classes composed entirely of underclassmen, in most cases the non-availability of primary sources, and other factors tend to discourage their interest in doing original research. Their lecture notes are compiled mostly from secondary sources.

Students likewise are seldom exposed to primary materials, nor are they given hands-on experience in working with historical method. The prevailing feeling seems to be that "doing history" on this level is necessary only for upperclassmen or graduate students. (The same standard, however, is not usually applied to the study of the other sciences and social sciences, which requires some sort of laboratory experience even for Freshmen and Sophomores.)

Teaching local history is an effective way of overcoming these deficiencies endemic in community colleges (and, one suspects, in many four-year schools) by providing opportunity for hands-on historical study for students and faculty. It is a good vehicle for teaching historical method, alike in purpose to the teaching of any history -- to educate in the seeking and selecting of historical facts, drawing

reasonable inferences from them, and placing the problems of the present and the prospects for the future in an historical perspective. Local history centers these objectives around a specific region, making it of particular interest to local students, and, the scope being less, allowing for more attention to the method and uses of history. Further, the local history of any period can provide a context for the study of related national and world history. Stress on method provides transfer students especially with skills useful in any future study of history, while seeing the reflection of national and world events in the local scene is especially beneficial for non-transfer students for whom this may be the only formal course in history.

Materials for instruction in local history, and for practicing the historical method, are varied and close at hand. Primary sources such as public, private, and church records, correspondence, diaries, commercial ledgers, unpublished manuscripts, and newspaper files, which abound in local archives, are available for class work and individual research. Legal documents are readily accessible at nearby county court houses and municipal halls. Artifacts and old photographs, tapes from oral history projects, and slide programs on local historic sites can add variety and interest to instructional methods. Field trips to historic places, homes, and public buildings appeal to students and are valuable in studying architecture, interiors, furnishings, occupations, ways of worship, and other items of past local culture.

The study of local history is appropriate for the community college because of its regional focus, its use of local historical societies as a source of information and a depository for exceptional student research, and its provision of a community service to the young and old who are proud of their heritage and wish to know it better.

The presenter's course in South Jersey History, given at Atlantic Community College, is offered as an example of what can be done with local history.

First, the kind of local history was decided upon. We chose to omit most political history, while stressing economic, social, and cultural history. This choice reflects the preferences of the instructor, the assumed interest of the students, and the need to make the course manageable within one semester. Next, the area to be included was defined. Would it be the history of a community, a county, the state, or what? At Atlantic, we chose to offer a history of the region bounded by the Pine Barrens on the north, the Delaware Bay and River on the south and west, and the ocean on the south and east. This area is economically, socially, culturally, geographically, and topographically distinguishable from the rest of New Jersey, and has had a unique historical development different from that of the central and northern parts of the state.

On the other hand, the region is in New Jersey and the United States. Therefore, when students study the early settlement of South Jersey, for instance, they are introduced to the whole sweep of 16th and 17th-century European exploration and settlement in the New World. Another opportunity for teaching state, national, and Western history from the springboard of local history is in the examination of South Jersey's agricultural and industrial development in the colonial period -- were they behind or in advance of the same developments elsewhere in the colonies and in Europe and how did they respond to British colonial mercantilism. From the 19th century, the issues surrounding the Civil War and the directions taken by the New Immigration offer the chance to explore comparisons between South Jersey and the broader American scene.

The presenter found, after teaching the course for one or two semesters, that a general narrative text would be helpful. Students could become acquainted with the needed factual background while class time could be freed for in depth study of particular topics, an examination of primary sources, or inquiry exercises for developing historical and cognitive skills. For South Jersey, however, such a text did not exist. Books on local history abound, but they deal with a single topic, such as the iron industry, or a particular community or county, or they consist of an indiscriminate collection of stories, fables, and folklore unsuitable for a serious course in history. The solution was to research, organize, and write a local history designed specifically for the course. This done, the text is now used in conjunction with an excellent monograph on the local iron industry from 1766-1848, the purpose being to expose students to another type of historical writing.

To teach something of the historical method is one of the stated goals of the course. To accomplish this, both in and outside the classroom students are introduced to written and non-written primary sources from which they are asked to draw historical inferences. An example is our study of South Jersey in the American Revolution. In class, excerpts from locally written speeches, broadsides, correspondence, and diaries are read, from which students can determine the reasons for, and the nature and extent of revolutionary sentiment in South Jersey, a situation made particularly complex and interesting in this area by the presence of a large, pacifist Quaker minority. (Ideally, these excerpts should be reproduced and distributed to the students instead of merely being read to them by the instructor. However, they are in widely scattered sources, some existing in manuscript only, and the task of compiling and publishing a collection of them has not yet been undertaken.) Outside class, students "see" the Revolution by a trip to the site of Fort Mercer, where the battle is described and where chevaux-de-frise, recovered from the Delaware River, are also on display. A lesson on the social and moral influence of colonial

religion involves reading reflections on local morality in the journals of 18th-century preachers from South Jersey and excerpts from their manuscript sermons. From these readings, the students determine the value system of the local clergy of that time. These values are compared with those of some of the parishioners when the records of several church trials are presented. (Most of the laity, by the way, seem to have heeded their preachers' admonitions.)

Significant secondary sources as well are used in class, as are such artifacts as pieces of South Jersey glass, bog iron scraps, and samples of marl. Colored slides of buildings and period furniture of the area add interest and offer opportunity to compare the development of local architecture and the decorative arts with that of other parts of the country.

The research assignments, from which each student selects one, are described in the attached syllabus. Each project is designed to provide a group of specific learning experiences tailored to a student's particular circumstances. The field trips are the most popular, but because they are on Saturdays and at the student's expense, alternatives must be provided for class members with other Saturday obligations or limited funds. Places visited on the trips include historic churches, taverns (not now operating as such), restored private homes, historic houses open to the public, historic villages, battlefields, and museums. At each site, its significance is discussed and some primary documents relating to the place or event are read. A reaction paper or photographic report is required for each trip.

The map project is comprehensive in time and topic, requiring research and its application to a different medium. It is creative but it does not entail travel and great expense. The photographic essay is for people who can create art with a camera, but who cannot travel on Saturdays or prefer to seek out their own places of interest.

The requirement of a theme and a spread of time and place prevent indiscriminate picture taking that has no historical meaning. The research paper requires only limited travel, introduces the students to local historical libraries with their collections of primary and secondary materials, allows them to focus on a specific topic of interest, and helps them develop the skills usually associated with writing a history term paper. Some excellent original research has been produced by students who have selected this more traditional history project, and their work has been placed in a number of local libraries.

Oral history would seem to be a natural project for a course in local history, but it has its liabilities. How to frame questions, to conduct interviews, to handle recording equipment, to be sensitive to the personalities of those being interviewed, and to distinguish history from opinion and fable are skills that can be mastered only with extensive training and practice. Only an expert in the techniques of oral history, and more time than can be allotted in this course, can provide these. This instructor abandoned oral history as a student project after a two-semester tryout. Others doubtless can carry it out successfully.

Opinion and fable rightly interpreted, of course, are themselves a kind of historical evidence in that they say something about the mind of the people at a given time. The local historian, however, must be on his guard lest he allow them to pass for unembellished fact. In short, he, like any historian, should seek to verify his data. Especially because folk tales, exaggeration, and undocumented claims about people and places are the stock of much local tradition, whether oral or written, the teacher of local history, if true to his profession and students, sorts out fact from fantasy and labels each. In exposing the difference he may bring upon himself the ire of those who cherish their long held fictions, but that is a risk he must take.

The historian speaks with a less certain voice when he applies the lessons of the past to the present and, moreso, to the future; yet he feels strongly that there is a connection. The local historian perhaps is more cautious here than others because he cannot escape to the broader generalities of national and world history. The whole point of his subject is to be specific. He may, nonetheless, suggest some possible effects the past may have had upon the present and future of the region. Certainly he will wish to show that the choices of the past can be instructive in decision making for the present, whether by the community or individuals within it.

This paper has tried to show that local resources can be used to teach meaningful history to local people, whom it is the function of the community college to serve. To some of them Ancient Rome, England's Glorious Revolution, or even Boston in 1775 may seem too remote in time and place to be of interest or concern today. But local people, local places, and local events have an appealing immediacy about them, though they may date from a century or two ago. This appreciation for the familiar the teacher of local history seeks to tap for the purpose of bringing to the enjoyers a deeper understanding of their community and themselves.

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